



Maplewood Dog Training

353 N Main St – Sharon, MA 02067

781 806 5707

www.maplewooddog.com

How to Teach your Dog to “Down” on Cue

By Katrin Andberg

What is a “Down?”

Most dog owners enjoy having a dog that will lie down and settle on cue. The act of moving into a “down” position is very different than another concept that many owners label as “down”- putting four feet on the floor and not jumping up on a person, table or other object. So not to confuse your dog, we highly recommend that you teach your dog separate cues for each behavior. The action of moving into the position of haunches on the floor and elbows on the floor is labeled as “down” or “lie down.” The action of putting all four feet on the floor and not jumping is labeled as “off.”

There are also two positions that a dog can be in that are labeled as “down.” One is called a “Sphinx Down,” where the dog is lying erect looking like the Sphinx’ of Egypt, the second is where the dog is lying down with one hip resting on the ground. Both of these positions are correct, though many dogs prefer lying with one hip on the floor when they are resting as it is a position that requires less physical effort to maintain than the Sphinx Down.

The Methods for Teaching “Down”

There are two primary reward based methods for teaching your dog to “down” on cue. The first is called the “Capture Method” and the second is known as the “Lure-Reward Method.” Both of these methods utilize some form of tangible reward for your dog when he successfully moves into the position and neither method involves compulsion or forcing a dog to move into the position against his will.

Capture Method

The Capture Method is generally a method that many pet owners find difficult because it is a method that requires a good amount of patience and it gives little instant gratification. The Capture Method though does have the greatest success in the long term of creating a dog that truly understands what the “down” hand signal and verbal cue means and a dog that will enthusiastically move into the “down” position on a subtle hand signal or on the first quiet verbal cue. The Capture Method also has the added benefit of encouraging your dog

to be an active participant in the learning process and to problem solve until he figures out what you are asking of him.

To utilize the Capture Method, we recommend you begin with your dog on a leash or tether. Attach the leash to your dog's collar and step on it giving your dog enough leash to comfortably stand up, but not enough that he can jump on you. If you are utilizing a tether, attach the tether to a solid object or wall and hook your dog to it by the collar. Once your dog is on the tether, stand so that you are just out of reach of your dog should he try to jump on you.

Take out some small, high value food rewards that your dog likes to eat and hold them in your left hand. Take your right hand and hold it as if you were going to give someone a hi-five. Now, move it as if you were going to hi-five the floor and hold it comfortably, palm facing the ground, at waist level. This will be your "down" hand signal. Face your dog, that is on his leash or tether, and give the "down" hand signal and hold your signal. Keep the hand signal out for your dog to see it and keep it steady. Your dog doesn't know that this hand position means he is to "down" yet, but given a short amount of time he will begin to associate the hand cue with the behavior.

Now comes the challenging part, standing in front of your dog with your steady "down" hand signal, simply stand there and wait. Do not talk to your dog, do not make eye contact with him, instead stare at the floor where you want him to "down," do not verbally tell him to "down," simply wait. What you are waiting for is for your dog to begin trying various things trying to find out what you want and what will "work" to earn the treat. Your dog may try sitting, he may try jumping up, he may try barking, he will try all manner of things trying to get you to give him the treat. Ignore all of these behavior offerings he is giving you, stand there silently giving the "down" hand signal. After a period of time, it may be 30 seconds, it may be 5 minutes, your dog will get bored, decide he doesn't know what you want and he will *lie down*. The moment he lies down, say, "Down," praise him and give him the food reward you have in your left hand. What a "Good Boy!" for figuring out what you wanted!

After giving your dog the food reward, encourage him to sit or stand up again. Stand in front of him again and give your steady "down" hand signal. Patiently and silently wait until he offers the "down" position once again. When he moves into the position, say the verbal cue, "Down," reward and praise him.

After a few repetitions, you will find that you stand patiently waiting for less and less time between "downs." Your dog has begun to associate you standing in front of him giving the "down" hand signal with moving into position. End your training session after about 5 or 10 minutes, while your dog is still actively engaged in the training and wanting more.

Once you have had a few training sessions, your dog will begin to offer "down" the moment you give the hand signal. At that point, you are ready to begin giving the verbal "down" cue as you give the hand signal.

Be sure to only give the verbal cue once, and don't repeat it. Teach your dog that he is to "down" on the first cue and only the first cue.

The Lure-Reward Method

The Lure-Reward Method is the most commonly used reward-based method for teaching a dog to "down" and gives a fair deal of instant gratification to the owner. The negative to this method is that many owners find that their dog becomes dependent on the exaggerated hand signal utilized in this method and often time's dependant on the food treat in the owner's hand to move into the "down" position.

To teach your dog to "down" using the Lure-Reward Method, first get your dog in a "sit" position. Take a food treat in your finger tips of one hand and bring the treat to your dog's nose so that he is sniffing it. Next take the treat, and slowly move it down to the ground encouraging your dog to follow your hand to the floor. As your dog's nose moves to the ground, his front feet will go off-balance and he will move into the "down" position. When he is in the position, give the verbal cue, "Down," praise him and reward him with the food treat.

After you have lured your dog into the position with the food treat three or four times, try having him follow your hand to the floor without a food treat in your finger tips. As your dog begins to follow your hand more readily and move into the position at a more frequent and faster rate, begin giving the verbal cue, "Down" earlier and earlier until he is moving into the position on the verbal cue. Be sure to only say your verbal cue, "Down" once, and don't repeat it. If you get in the habit of repeating your verbal cue, your dog will learn to count and only move into the "down" position after you have repeated your verbal cue three or four times.

In summary, both the Capture and the Lure-Reward Methods for teaching a dog to "down" on cue have been successfully used by many dog owners and trainers. Both methods have their positives and negatives. The Capture Method takes initial patience, but gives lasting gains with an independent performance of the "down" by your dog. The Lure-Reward Method creates an initial high rate of reward, but can create longer term dependency on the lure. It takes an educated dog owner to decide which method would fit their training style and dog's temperament the best, and we hope this article has given you an inside look at teaching your dog to "down" on cue.